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AUTHOR Glanz, Jeffrey
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ABSTRACT

Statistics clearly demonstrate the need to assist students who may drop out of school or who may graduate with inadequate academic, social, and emotional skills. This paper describes efforts at one elementary school to address some of the needs of at-risk students. The program revolves around a structured martial arts class designed to develop self-control and discipline. Martial arts instructors instill the importance of courtesy, respect, honesty, sincerity, and discipline. What makes this program noteworthy, claims the author, is that martial arts training is incorporated as part of an overall curricular approach, aimed at assisting selected 4th and 5th graders who are either currently involved in gangs or likely to join them. The program is integrative as periodic groups sessions between classroom teachers, parents, and students meet to discuss ways of resolving difficulties and offer suggestions for improvement. Selected teachers also involve students in writing and reading lessons centered around martial arts topics. The paper discusses the success of the program and profiles one test case to back his assertions. While a martial arts program is neither a panacea nor an effective measure without other instructional strategies, it has proven successful for some at-risk students. (RJM)

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"A School/Curricular Intervention Martial Arts Program for At-Risk Students"

By

Jeffrey Glanz, Ed.D.
Kean College of New Jersey
Assistant Professor
Department of Instruction, Curriculum, and Administration

Address:
1000 Morris Ave.
Union, N. J. 07083

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Abstract: This article describes a unique school-based program aimed to assist elementary school students avoid some of the perils encountered by all too many inner-city youth. What makes this program noteworthy is that martial arts training is incorporated as part of an overall curricular approach aimed at assisting selected 4th and 5th graders who are either currently involved in gangs or likely to join them. While this martial arts program is certainly not a panacea, nor effective without other instructional strategies, it has proven quite successful for some students at-risk . The article concludes with a case study of one student at-risk in the program.

Introduction

Statistics abound and clearly demonstrate the need to assist students who are at-risk from dropping out of school or graduating without academic, social, and emotional skills. Some of the alarming statistics include the fact that nearly a million students drop out of high school every year and that dropout rates for African-American and Hispanic youth are twice as high than the white student dropout rate (Cantrell, 1992). While many programs address the needs of these students at the high school level (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993), attention to this problem at the elementary school level has been less frequent (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992/1993). This article describes efforts at one elementary school in Brooklyn, New York, to address some of the needs of at-risk students.

There have certainly been many programs and practices that have attempted to maximize success for students at-risk. Donmoyer and Kos (1993) reviewed five types of school programs and practices that have been adopted to address the needs of the at-risk. They include: supplemental, whole-school restructuring, therapy, intervention-team, and school-community linkage programs. Cuban (1989) reviewed many at-risk programs and concluded that successful programs employ a wide variety of instructional and non-instructional strategies and are well-integrated with the school's overall curricular-instructional program. The program described in this article, unique in its approach, was designed to work in consonance with ongoing school-wide, instructional, and curricular efforts.

The program essentially revolves around a structured martial arts class that is designed to develop self-control and discipline. Martial arts are more than learning how to punch and kick. If properly taught, they can be a catalyst for developing self-confidence, assertiveness, calmness,

concentration and self-control (Kauz, 1992). The founder of modern-day Karate, Gichen Funakoshi (1973), said that martial arts are not about winning or losing, but about the formation of character. Martial arts instructors instill the importance of being courteous, respectful, honest, sincere, and disciplined. They tell their students that it takes more courage to walk away from a fight than it does to fight. Successful martial arts instructors all over the world have strived to instill these lofty, yet attainable, goals in their students.

Although martial arts instruction can be especially beneficial for at-risk students, often these classes are not taught by professionally licensed teachers, nor are there coordinated efforts to work with personnel at the local school. Due to disjointed efforts, the benefits of martial arts instruction are "hit or miss." Additionally, there have not been any attempts to study the effects of martial arts training on the at-risk population.

Consequently, the efforts described in this article to develop an intervention martial arts program integrated with the school curriculum and conducted by professional school officials are unique. This article also attempts to discover the benefits of martial arts training by providing a "portrait" of one at-risk student.

Martial Arts at P.S. 49[1]

Scene: Gymnasium in an elementary school in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York - 3:30 p.m.

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1. To assure anonymity throughout this article I have changed the names of the school and individuals involved in the program. Although all names are fictitious, events and comments are accurate. The article has been read by two readers, both of whom were involved in the program, to assure that no child can be identified by the descriptions given and that, in particular, comments related to the gang cannot be associated with any particular student in the program.

They bow to their teacher (*Sensei*) as they walk onto the gym floor to start their class. They assume their prearranged positions, five rows of five students. The Sensei strides up and down their ranks in his spotless uniform (gi) as they silently give him their focused attention. They respond instantly to his commands.

"1, 2, 3," shouts the Sensei.

"Eyes focused forward! Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth."

"4, 5, 6."

"Kiaiiii . . . "

A few hours ago, they were fourth and fifth graders at P.S. 49 in Brooklyn, New York. Now they're Karate students practicing various punches, kicks, and kata (forms).

At this particular session Sensei (a Japanese term for teacher) explains the purpose of their martial arts training:

"Karate is more than punching and kicking. Karate will help you develop confidence, concentration, and self-control. Winning and losing doesn't matter. What does is that you become courteous, responsible, and disciplined boys and girls."

After class two boys can be heard saying:

"Did ya see Sensei take those 4 boards and smack 'em. The pieces went flying all over the place. I tried to hit one of the broken pieces and almost broke my hand!"

For the past three years, we have been conducting Karate classes after school, twice weekly, for about twenty to thirty students at P.S. 49. P.S. 49 is located in Brooklyn, New York. It was built in 1905 and is a large inner-city elementary school serving approximately 1500 pupils (kindergarten through grade 5). The school is administered by a principal and three assistant principals. It was identified, in 1990, by the New York State Department of Education as a school "in need of assistance" as a result of low scores in reading at the third grade level. The 1990-1991 pupil ethnic survey provided the following data about the school's student population: African-American 85%; Hispanic-American 10%; Asian American 3%; and Other 2%. The socioeconomic data indicated that 95% of the students were eligible this year for free lunch. P.S. 49 is also a Chapter I school.

As assistant principal for grades four and five, I encountered a host of severe discipline problems. Over the past several years, we established clear guidelines and expectations for student behavior. We instituted our own 12 'commandments' as explained by Wager (1992/1993): for example, no weapons, no fighting, no swearing, no threatening, etc. We established a system of rewards for conformity to our 'commandments' with reinforcements that included movies, trips, badges, parties and even Met games.

Despite our earnest and determined efforts, we could not manage the behavior of a number of recalcitrant youngsters. Some of the infractions were knife carrying, setting firecrackers off in the bathrooms, pulling fire alarms at dismissal, and serious punching and kicking that caused injury to other students. After employing a number of means such as daily cooperation cards, parental conferences, guidance sessions, in-house

suspensions, and suspensions from one to five school days, we were determined to explore an alternative to these stern, ineffective measures (Wager, 1992/1993).

I have been personally involved in the martial arts for over 25 years. Martial arts training involves intensive physical and mental training, dedication, concentration, and discipline. Over the years I have seen a number of people develop greater self-confidence, will-power, and self-esteem. Why not start a Karate (martial arts) program at P.S. 49, I thought?

With the support of our principal and PTA, I outlined a martial arts program aimed at assisting 10 students at-risk (four in grade four and six in grade five). These 10 students were involved in some, if not all, of the inappropriate activities mentioned above. After being interviewed, they all demonstrated an interest in taking Karate lessons after school.

I explained that continued enrollment in the class was contingent on their acceptable behavior during the school day. Any serious infraction would mean suspension from the Karate class. The students agreed to sign a contract co-signed by their teacher and parent.

Baseline data on these students were recorded prior to and after the institution of the Karate program. At first, our goal was to minimize aggressive behaviors such as hitting and kicking. After these behaviors were under control, we became interested in behaviors that demonstrated more attentiveness to schoolwork such as completion of homework and in-class assignments.

At first, the two girls and eight boys thought that the Karate class was going to be fun and games. They imagined they would run wild and

kick and punch whomever they pleased. They were in store for a rude awakening.

The martial arts class was taught by a first degree black belt in a Japanese form of Karate. The style is essentially based on controlled movements demanding concentration and focus. A series of choreographed punches and kicks performed from a variety of postures comprised the majority of techniques taught. The students were given lessons in self-defense. An essential part of the class was attitude-adjustment training wherein the Sensei, Mr. Jeffrey Shurack a junior high school teacher by day, would discuss acceptable behaviors in and out of the dojo (martial arts class). Students were led in frequent discussions about a variety of situations they might encounter. For instance, "What would you do if someone called you a name?" often led to lively discussions as to the proper course of action. Discussions were informal and student participation was encouraged by allowing children to voice their opinions without value-laden judgments.

However, not all went as we had hoped. After the second week, three of the ten youngsters dropped out of the class voluntarily. Still, the remaining seven students eagerly awaited each class. They made comments such as, "This stuff is neat;" "I can't wait for the next class;" "I want to be like Sensei." Students developed a unique relationship with their Sensei. It was not uncommon for students to bow when they either saw him (or me for that matter) in the corridor or after school.

In conjunction with the Karate class, behavioral reports were issued to the teachers. Their behavior was monitored by the Sensei and the assistant principal. Teachers had to sign interim behavioral reports and visits by the Sensei to students' classes were not uncommon.

An integral component of the program was this frequent monitoring of student behavior throughout the school day. If students attended class regularly, did not demonstrate aggressive behaviors such as fighting, and attempted to complete assignments, they were rewarded by being withdrawn from the class periodically to practice their Karate techniques in the gymnasium. During these times, personal and rather lengthy conversations were held between Sensei and student. At times the guidance counselor was asked to sit in. These sessions were often productive and solidified the relationship between Sensei and student by building trust and confidence. Students would frequently ask to speak with Sensei to discuss a personal problem.

The program was integrative in the sense that other members from the faculty were encouraged to participate. From time to time, group sessions were conducted wherein classroom teachers, SBST members, parents, and students met to discuss ways of resolving difficulties and offering suggestions for improvement. The program was also integrative in another sense. The martial arts class, although conducted after-school, soon became a purposeful part of the school's planned curricular activities. Selected teachers would involve students in writing and reading lessons centered around martial arts topics. For example, a fourth grade teacher of two participants volunteered to allow these students to read books that were related to martial arts. The students were enthusiastic about the arts and were encouraged by the teacher in class. The teacher reported that these students demonstrated greater attention to lessons in general as well as much improved behavior.

Further, it was not uncommon for the Sensei to request that students write essays and keep journals or diaries concerning their martial arts

practice. Some students developed fine portfolios of artwork which included pictures of Sensei breaking boards as well as a host of martial arts related images. Every effort was made to integrate their martial arts practice with curricular activities in the classroom.

A Portrait of Ernest:

Incorporating a qualitative research methodology through the use of portraits (Donmoyer, 1993; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) has recently gained favor. Donmoyer and Kos (1993) have recently demonstrated the efficacy of this case study approach in examining the at-risk population. While in-depth case studies are needed, I would like to present a brief, yet descriptive account of one particular student who was in many ways representative of the students involved in our martial arts program (O'Sullivan & Tennant, 1993). Data were gathered through the use of observations based on field notes, interviews, questionnaires, and video tape recordings. Information was gleaned from school personnel, especially the classroom teacher, the parent, the Sensei, and the student himself. Multiple observers, multiple data collection methods, and extensive "thick" descriptions were employed to attain as accurate a description as possible.

Ernest is a 10 year old African American fourth-grade student attending P.S. 49 in Brooklyn, New York. Ernest was retained once in grade 3 and is two years below grade level in reading and math. Ernest has had excellent attendance in school, but has been a severe discipline problem since the first grade. He has been suspended four times within the last two years for the following incidents: striking another child across the face with his fist causing severe swelling and bleeding; throwing a chair at another student hitting the substitute teacher by accident; pulling the fire alarm

during the school day; and threatening another child in his class with a knife.

Ernest has had an unstable family life in that he has not seen his father for nearly five years. His father is incarcerated for robbery and attempted murder and is serving a lengthy sentence. His mother, who has only reported to school once in the past three years, is a crack addict. Ernest lives with an "aunt" across the street from school. Ernest is an only child.

Ernest recently has been involved in a neighborhood gang of approximately 15 other youth, mostly of junior high school age. Ernest is very intelligent and mature for his age. Although he is quite verbal, he does not participate in school. Teachers have reported the following comments appearing on report cards and cumulative record cards:

- Ernest is an active youngster who needs constant supervision. (grade 2)
- Ernest is intelligent and can do work if he wants to. (grade 1)
- Ernest is very aggressive and hostile to his classmates. (grade 2)
- Ernest needs help in reading and math. He does not participate and is very playful in class. (grade 3)
- Ernest threatens others and show no interest in school. (grade 4)
- Ernest has the potential, but clearly needs a more restrictive classroom environment.

Ernest has been referred to the guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal without any significant, longlasting change in behavior and attitude. Psychological tests indicate that he has above average intelligence. Standardized tests as well as teacher-made tests indicate that Ernest is low-achieving.

When the guidance counselor tried to explore Ernest's thoughts and feelings, the conversation typically went like this:

GC: How are you doing Ernest?

E: [no response]

GC: Well?

E: Fine.

GC: Well, you know Ernest I have been receiving very disturbing reports about your behavior.

E: [silence]

GC: Do you like school?

E: Yeh.

GC: Well. if you like school, that's great, but

E: Do I have to be here? I wanna go.

GC: We know you are a very bright boy and want the best for you. Your teacher and Mr. XXXXX really care about you.

E: [shrugs shoulders] I wanna go.

GC: Go where?

E: Out of here [storms out and runs through building for 10 minutes before being apprehended by security and brought to the AP's office. At the AP's office, the same conversation is repeated to no avail. Ernest is escorted back to class in time for lunch. He returns to class after lunch 30 minutes late. Excuse: playing basketball in the yard. . . .]

Although Ernest's profile may seem typical of troubled inner-city youth, it nonetheless requires serious attention since aforementioned strategies have proven unsuccessful. As assistant principal in the school, I had many interactions with Ernest and tried to establish rapport with him. His reluctance to trust anyone was not surprising, but our efforts to befriend

Ernest were frustrating. Would Ernest become another inner-city statistic? We were determined to help him despite the fact that we were underfunded, lacked essential resources, and were in an overcrowded school. If Ernest was the only troubled student, matters would be perhaps a bit easier. Actually, Ernest was one of about 10 seriously disruptive students in grades 4 and 5. As assistant principal, I seemed to have exhausted many strategies available to me in the school. The next logical step was a superintendent's suspension which might have removed Ernest from the school. Although I have resorted to this option in the past, I remained very uncomfortable about this action and hoped to avoid it in the future.

I had considered the martial arts class for some time but was reluctant because I wasn't certain how other educators, in and out of the school, would react. Martial arts has a reputation for uncontrolled violence as reflected in movies and T.V. However, given my reputation with nearly 20 years experience in the Board of Education and a doctorate in curriculum development, I thought this might be an opportune time to implement a martial arts program closely tied to the ongoing curricular activities in the school. Again, with our principal's support, the program began.

Parenthetically, I might add that our principal was a forceful leader who had established law and order as well as a solid instructional program for over 13 years. The problems I discuss in this article only represent a minority of students.

Ernest showed much enthusiasm about our Karate class:

E: Yeah, I'm really interested. When can I begin?

AP: You know, martial arts are very demanding and require discipline and lots of hard work.

E: I can do it.

AP: Why are you so interested in the martial arts?

E: I don't know, just am.

AP: You like the violence and fighting?

E: Yeah, I guess. . . . You know Karate?

AP: Yep.

E: [nodding head in approval]

AP: You know the Sensei, teacher, is very strict and will not tolerate fooling around.

E: [no comment]

AP: You also should know that you can continue in the class as long as you continue to receive good reports from your teachers and me. And that you'll have to do homework and all that. . . . Sensei will explain all that. Okay?

E: Okay.

[Two weeks spent in the program]

The teacher, a licensed teacher from New York City and first degree black belt instructor, was interviewed about Ernests' progress in the Karate class. The Sensei reported that Ernest had much difficulty, at first, adjusting to the rigors and demands of the class. Ernest grew impatient and had difficulty maintaining concentration. As a result of a number of visits to Ernest's classroom during the school day by the AP and Sensei where conversations were conducted about his progress, a dramatic change in his attitude and attention seemed apparent. "It is due, I think," stated the Sensei, "to the fact that Ernest received positive reinforcement and encouragement from his classroom teacher, the AP, the principal, and me

that he was able to stick it out in class. The books and magazines (e.g. Karate Illustrated and Inside Kung-fu which were ordered through our school library, thanks to our librarian) seemed to sustain Ernest's interest in those early weeks."

Ernest also demonstrated enthusiasm about the class, but could not understand why his continued participation in the Karate program was contingent on his behavior and work during the day:

E: Why do I need to behave in class? Can't I just go to Karate?

S: Well, martial arts is really all about improving your character, behavior, and attitude in your whole life. You're learning very serious stuff, I mean, kicking and punching techniques. You need to understand when and how to use these skills? But besides being able to defend yourself, martial arts are about self-improvement - improving yourself, whatever you do - in the dojo (Karate school), at home, and in school. Do you know what I mean?

E: I think so.

S: You'll see, just keep practicing.

The martial arts class was not just a class where Ernest learned a series of techniques, but apparently became a place where he could receive positive feedback, respect, and emotional support. The fact that Ernest did quite well, due to the fact that he was very well coordinated, contributed to Ernest's success. He was the first student to achieve an orange belt, one of the few to achieve yellow and blue belts, and at the time of this writing was the highest ranked student member with a green belt. As the highest ranking member, Ernest was allowed to teach selected students. In addition, students in the class had to bow to Ernest in respect for his rank.

Ernest's self-esteem was positively affected by the respect and support he received in his martial arts class.

S: Do you think it's important to show your teacher and fellow students respect?

E: Yeah, in Karate they bow to me. In class I need to do okay, I mean, work, behaving and all that, you know. . . .

Interestingly, Ernest made reference to his need to behave and work well in class during the school day when asked about 'respect.' Sensei didn't ask him about working well or behaving in class, but Ernest realized that respect in the dojo meant that he was obligated to demonstrate respect for others. For Ernest, this meant behaving and doing better in school. Both teachers and administrators indeed reported that Ernest had improved greatly. Although he refrained from participating in reading and math activities (due to his insecurities about being below grade level), Ernest demonstrated restraint in terms of behavior, in and out of class.

Sensei allowed Ernest to assist in teaching the class as often as possible. We felt this experience would be quite beneficial for his esteem and self-development. On one particular occasion, Sensei asked Ernest to talk to two new students about developing the correct martial arts attitude in terms of expected conduct in and out of the dojo.

E: Now, in this class you'll have to behave and not fool around. This is serious and so is Sensei. Everyone helps everybody. Everyone bows to respect everyone. No trouble, got it? If you do have a problem, speak to Sensei because he can help you, you know. . . .

Sensei asked Ernest how he felt after speaking to the new students. He stated that he felt "kind of funny." "You know, I used to get into trouble, . . . boy, I've changed." [smile]

In a recent interview with Ernest, I asked him about his fascination with gang membership which not too long ago played a prominent role in his life after school. His response is instructive not only for what a martial arts class can offer, but for the way we structure life in school and classroom.

AP: You used to get into a lot of trouble.

E: Yeah.

AP: Tell me why you think you got into so much trouble?

E: I'm not sure. Because I didn't like school and math, 'specially reading. [pause] I guess I had nothing better to do, you know. [pause] What a jerk I must have been. [smile, shrugs shoulders]

AP: What about the gang situation?

E: I really was too young to be a real member. But I liked the gang.

AP: Why?

E: Because you were cool.

AP: And popular in school?

E: Yeah. Kids were scared.

AP: Scared of what?

E: Getting beat up.

AP: You just beat on kids?

E: No, they [other gang members] told me that if I was to join, I need to kick ass, uh, you know.

AP: Yeah. So why don't you join in anymore?

E: You know. [pause] First, Sensei would kill me! And, don't need them anymore.

It appears that gang membership for Ernest, and I presume others, was a way to personify power and a need for belonging (Cantrell & Cantrell,

1993). It seems that our Karate program satisfied Ernest's needs and, therefore, he no longer desired gang membership. This is in consonance with Glasser's (1986) control theory in which he states that schools do not fulfill the needs of students for belonging and power. Schools and classrooms, in fact, attempt to not only disempower students through conformity, but also stress individual achievement as opposed to nurturing a cooperative and supportive environment (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec Johnson, 1993). Consequently, students turn to other sources to satisfy their needs of belonging and power. In most cases, especially for children in dysfunctional families, needs for power and belonging are fulfilled by peer groups and/or gang membership. Herein lay the benefits of a school-based martial arts program, for it supports the needs of belonging and power.

The degree to which the martial arts class was integrated with the school's curricular program can be evidenced by statements from the Sensei, classroom teacher, and assistant principal:

S: First, I required each student to hand in a weekly cooperation card as well as quarterly report cards to ascertain how he/she was doing in class. Second, I visited some of the students to observe and converse with them. This had a latent effect in that they realized how much I cared about their school work. Teachers, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal were cooperative and demonstrated their support for the program. Of particular importance to the success of the program was the support, especially financially, from the PTA.

T: At first I didn't see how a Karate class was going to help these kids improve, socially and academically. I think the success many of these students achieved can be attributed to the fact that the entire school program was marshalled. Not only were school faculty and staff involved,

but curricular innovations such as incorporating reading material on the arts, writing activities and the like helped stimulate and motivate these kids. I would especially like to mention something I've never seen in all my years as a teacher. I couldn't believe how these kids, who were some of the roughest in the school, bowed in deference to their Sensei and the assistant principal.

AP: The benefits of martial arts training are clear for many students at-risk. What makes our class unique is that we've tried to integrate the program as part of our instructional/curricular program. In that way, we are better able to monitor and control many aspects of the program. While I encourage martial arts in general, training that stresses respect, control, cooperation, and discipline is particularly important. Whether the kid can break five boards or just one is immaterial. What counts is the sense of spirit that is nurtured and developed. Our objective has been to help these students achieve stability in their life, develop a sense of hope, self-confidence, self-esteem, and respect for themselves and others. It is my belief that before any of these students are capable of functioning academically, schools need to, as Glasser (1986) has explained, satisfy their basic human needs for belonging and power.

Conclusion

There have been many exemplary approaches for students at-risk which certainly can be implemented. For example, computers (Bialo & Sivin, 1989), mentoring (White-Hood, 1993), and the 'toughlove' approach (Roberts, 1993) are three programs which have been successful for selected students at-risk. Martial arts training is another approach that deserves attention in schools. Martial arts training, popularized by movies such as

the "Karate Kid," are found all over the country and are successful physical education programs that instill self-confidence and discipline in many students.

I advocate martial arts training in schools for several reasons: One, it has worked marvelously for youngsters at our school. Teachers reported fewer incidences of aggressive behaviors and more attentiveness in class. Our program has expanded because teachers and administrators are now recommending students for the program. Two, Karate programs in schools are relatively easy to organize with little if any cost to the school or PTA. The advantage of having these classes in schools is that monitoring behavior is much more feasible than if classes were held off-site.

Martial arts training is certainly not a panacea, nor is successful with all students. But if P.S. 49 is any indication, then martial arts training may be a viable alternative in assisting some students at-risk achieve their potential and hopefully dissuade their involvement in gangs.

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